

Corrupting India's Military History – A Dangerous Trend

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Abstract

The article brings out that the trend of writing incorrect accounts of military actions, to glorify, portray military history incorrectly. Operations at Nathu La/Cho La in 1967 have been narrated to make the point. It states that it is important to portray failures, or less than perfect conduct of operations, so that lessons can be learnt and mistakes made in conduct of an operation are avoided in the future. Unfortunately, the military and military historians today have different views and failure in battle seems to carry with it a stigma and guilt, which is totally unwarranted. The article concludes that if handled correctly, even failures and lost battles can be used to glorify and motivate and yet we can learn constructive lessons from them.

Introduction

This article aims to highlight the trend of omission, distortion, and obfuscation of facts in records such as unit war diaries and regimental histories which are the basic documents referred to by military historians. This phenomenon is rarely encountered in the documents pertaining to World War I and II, and even earlier. However, it is increasingly being noticed in the post-Independence period in the Indian Army¹. Examples of such distortion of records are found in many tactical and operational level operations that the Indian Army was involved in after 1947. These may have been done in good faith to safeguard the honour of a person, unit, or country or because in the fog of war events get distorted. However, this distortion obfuscates the correct picture in official history and

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does not enable lessons to be learnt to take better decisions or do operations in a better manner the next time. To highlight the problem, the Nathu La – Cho La operations of 1967 have been chosen as a case study. This operation has once again come into the limelight in recent years. This trend is not limited to the Indian Army alone, or even to only the military; there is even a formal term for this — “historical negationism”².

The Accounts of the 1967 Skirmishes

The Nathu La Skirmish. The skirmish at Nathu La took place in September 1967. This was the first time that the Indian Army gave the Chinese a ‘bloody nose’. The story has been narrated in several books including regimental histories and biographies of Lt Gen Sagat Singh³, who was commanding the division in Sikkim when the operation was conducted. In addition, several articles have been published in numerous journals written mostly by officers who were present or took part in the operation. Two recent events have brought the Nathu La skirmish in the limelight again. One is the publication of a book titled “Watershed 1967 - India's Forgotten Victory over China” in 2020, written by Probal DasGupta⁴. The second is the episode concerning the Nathula and Chola battles of 1967 which was broadcast on TV in *Tales of Valour* on 09 and 10 Jan 2021 on the Times Now. There was also a Bollywood movie called ‘*Paltan*’ (battalion) which came out in 2018 and covered the operations at Nathu La. Sadly, these narrations have been less than truthful in recounting the events of the conflict.

At first glance, ‘Watershed 1967 - India's Forgotten Victory over China’ appears to be dealing with an important event in India's military history. Unfortunately, the book has several errors in the correlation of events and facts. A review of the book by this author has been published in the Journal of the United Service Institution of India, January – March 2021 and could be seen for further details.⁵

The most glaring lacuna in the book is the distortion of facts relating to 2 Grenadiers. In this author's knowledge, the only authentic unclassified version of the battle is the diary of Second Lieutenant (2/Lt) (later Colonel) NC Gupta, which gives a day-by-day account of the occurrences from 11-14 Sep 1967.⁶ Its authenticity is sound because it was written daily as the events occurred and not in hindsight after 40-50 years, like this book and

some articles written by a few others. The diary brings out many lesser-known facts including instances of apparent cowardice, especially the vacation of South Shoulder at a critical juncture by a few soldiers of 2nd Grenadiers led by 2/Lt. Attar Singh. An account of this episode has been covered in detail in the articles 'The Skirmish at Nathula (1967)' published in the Indian Military Review in Aug 2018 and 'Remembering the War We Forgot 51 years ago – How India Gave China a Bloody Nose' by Vandana Menon and Nayanika Chatterjee in The Print on 01 Oct 2018.

The regimental history of The Grenadiers, titled 'The Grenadiers – A Tradition of Valour', was written by Colonel RD Palsokar in 1980. The book gives a different narrative. On page 365, the author writes:

"At one stage it appeared that the force fighting from the South Shoulder was wiped out as it was the main target of the Chinese. The troops could not hold it and had to fall back. When the Chinese fire died down, they once again occupied the feature. The South Shoulder would have remained unoccupied had 2nd Lieutenant Attar Singh not been there. His personal example inspired the men to stay fast."

Colonel RD Palsokar (Guards) is a well-known military historian who has penned many regimental histories and biographies. It is probable that the primary source for his use were the inputs given to him by The Grenadier Regiment from the accounts submitted by the unit.

Another example of this historical negationism syndrome is the article titled 'The Nathu La skirmish: When Chinese Were Given a Bloody Nose', by Major General Sheru Thapliyal, in the 'Force' magazine in 2004 and reprinted in the CLAWS website in 2011⁷. He writes:

"2 Grenadiers were initially shaken up due to the loss of Captain Dagar and injury to their CO but found their man of the moment in Lieutenant Attar Singh who went round from trench to trench to rally the troops and was later promoted as Captain on the spot."

A short resume describing the events relating to South Shoulder on 11 Sep, as described in Gupta's diary, has been published in the Indian Military Review. It is reproduced below:

"During the first day's action, there was a loss of morale in 2 Grenadiers when troops occupying the South Shoulder vacated their positions. This became evident after breakdown of communications. Finding no response from the post on radio and observing about a dozen troops running down the slopes of South Shoulder minus their helmets, packs and rifles, the Brigade Commander asked his Signals officer, 2/Lt NC Gupta to go up to South Shoulder with a spare radio set. On reaching South Shoulder at around 10 am, Gupta found the post abandoned and informed Brigadier Bakshi, who asked him to hold the post until reinforcements reached. About an hour later, Brigadier Bakshi spotted six soldiers sitting behind a huge rock around 100 metre down South Shoulder and asked Gupta to investigate. On reaching the spot, Gupta found that they were from 2 Grenadiers, including 2/Lt Attar Singh who was in command of the post at South Shoulder. Their radio set had been switched off. Gupta made him speak to the Brigade Commander who gave him a mouthful and ordered them to return to the post, accompanied by Gupta. At about 12 pm, Gupta discerned some movement in one of the bodies lying next to the fence barely 10 metre from the Chinese bunker. Taking advantage of the fog, he went ahead to investigate. He discovered that it was a badly wounded Major Bishan Singh, 'Tiger Nathula', who had been injured in the initial firing. Bishan was a 6 foot tall jat while Gupta was a diminutive five foot three, almost half his weight. With great difficulty Gupta managed to drag Bishan into our defences and made him speak to the Brigade Commander. Bakshi ordered Gupta to evacuate him using four men from 2 Grenadiers while he stayed on with the post commander and one Havildar."

From the words in the diary, Attar Singh was not trying to rally the troops but had abandoned the post along with his men. More than 30 soldiers were later court martialled for cowardice. Surprisingly, Attar Singh was not among them.

The story of 2 Grenadiers would not be complete without relating the episode of the missing pages of Gupta's diary. It is given below in his own words:

"After the end of the event, a couple of officers of the brigade were asked to submit their versions of the battle to the brigade commander. Since I was in the habit of maintaining a daily diary since my NDA days, I had been maintaining the account of the activities leading to it and of the events of 11 Sept and beyond. I, therefore, submitted my account in a normal fauji file cover. The file had:

- Seven pages of important events leading to 11 Sept.
- Nine pages of events of 11 Sept.
- Ten pages of events from 11 Sept evening to cease fire.

After about a month, the file was returned to me but I did not bother to check if all pages had been returned. Like a good soldier, I carried it with me on all my postings and even after retirement in 1992. Around the early twenties, Major General VK Singh (he was Adjutant of 17 MDSR in 1967) was writing part three of the history of the Corps of Signals. He approached me for some gen on the operations. I decided to hand him over this file. Out of sheer curiosity to re-live the events, I started reading it and to my horror found ten pages missing. These were the most critical pages dealing with the events of 11 Sept.

I informed this to Gen VK who told me to try and remember the events and write them. I did this and gave him the file that contained the events leading to 11 Sept and events after 11 Sept in original. The events of 11 Sept were written on white paper and filed accordingly. I also made an endorsement on the first page of the events post 11 Sept that "Nine pages containing details of 11 Sept are missing".

In July 2016, Mr Vijay Dagar, nephew of Captain PS Dagar met me at Delhi where I had come from Australia for my knee operation. After the operation on 10 Aug

2016, I went to Captain Dagar Museum in Najafgarh and presented this file to Mr Vijay Dagar and told him about the missing pages. To my utter shock, he produced those nine pages in original and the file become one as it was when handed to the Brigade HQ. This is a combine of destiny and a miracle waiting to happen. Mr Vijay Dagar found these pages with 2nd Grenadiers and was able to take them. Page 1 of these nine pages has an endorsement in red ink in commander's own hand "2/Lt Gupta's Battle Account". In June 2019, all the pages were laminated and then presented in original to its rightful owners – The Nathu La Brigade."

The Cho La Skirmish. The missing pages from Gupta's diary point to the disturbing trend already mentioned — the distortion of military records by units. Similar discrepancies were noticed in the records of the two battalions that were involved in the skirmish at Cho La that occurred about two weeks after the skirmish at Nathu La. These were 10 JAK Rifles and 7/11 Gorkha Rifles. The regimental histories available are 'The Path of Glory: Exploits of the 11 Gorkha Rifles' written by Gautam Sharma and the 'Soldiers of the Sun and Snow' published by the Jammu and Kashmir Rifles Regimental Centre at Jabalpur.

Cho La, located to the northwest of Nathu La, was held by 10 JAK Rifles which was under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Mahatam Singh. During the last week of Sep 1967, the battalion was being relieved by 7/11 Gorkha Rifles. The area was under 63 Mountain Brigade under the command of Brigadier Kundan Singh. According to the relief plan, the changeover was to take effect from 01 Oct 1967. The raising day of 10 JAK Rifles was on the same date and after briefing Lieutenant Colonel KB Joshi, CO 7/11 Gorkha Rifles, Lieutenant. Colonel Mahatam Singh had left on 30 Sep to conduct the *Havan* at the Battalion HQ at Changgu Lake next morning.

On the morning of 01 Oct, there was a scuffle at Point 15450 which had been handed over to the Gorkhas on the previous day. According to 10 JAK Rifles, the new post commander was Second Lieutenant Rana of 7/11 Gorkha Rifles. (According to the regimental history of 11 Gorkha Rifles, Point 15450 was held by Lieutenant Rathore.) There was a boulder at the post and Chinese and Indian

sentries usually stood on opposite sides. Since the Gorkhas were new to the post, the Chinese staked claim to the boulder, leading to heated argument between the two post commanders. During the argument, the Gorkha JCO rested his right foot on the boulder. The Chinese kicked his foot away. The JCO then put his foot back on the boulder and challenged his Chinese counterpart. The Chinese soldier bayoneted the Gorkha JCO injuring him in the arm. The Gorkhas retaliated by cutting off the arm of the Chinese with a kukri. The Chinese opened up with all they had, with the Indians responding in like fashion. The Chinese finally captured the post forcing the Gorkhas to withdraw.

Brigadier Kundan Singh, who was also officiating as the divisional commander, could not contact Lieutenant Colonel Joshi, CO 7/11 Gorkha Rifles, who had gone for a morning walk. Brigadier Kundan Singh then tried to contact Major Nair, the officiating CO of 10 JAK Rifles, but there was no answer from his telephone. Major SRR Aiyengar, the Brigade signal officer, told his B-1 operator, L/Nk Moga Singh, to take the radio set to Major Nair's bunker. When Moga Singh reached there, he found the telephone ringing repeatedly and the officer in a state of shock. Finally, Brigadier Kundan Singh was able to speak to Major Nair. After giving him a piece of his mind, he ordered Nair to proceed to Cho La Post.

Brigadier Kundan Singh also ordered the rest of 7/11 Gorkha Rifles to move up from Tamze. He himself moved up to Twin Huts, to see things for himself. Joshi was missing and everyone thought that he has been killed. At 1700 hours, Joshi reached Twin Huts where he met Brigadier Kundan Singh and requested permission to recapture Point 15450, which was granted. According to the Gorkhas, the attack was launched next morning and the position was re-occupied by them, the Chinese having vacated it during the night. The battalion was awarded two Vir Chakras during the incident.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Colonel Mahatam Singh, CO 10 JAK Rifles, who had been informed about the firing, immediately left the Battalion HQ for the road head at Tamze, from where he started walking up reaching Saddle at 1230 hours. He assumed command and told Brigadier Kundan Singh that he would recapture Point 15450. He ordered Major Subhas Dogra, who had just handed

over the post to the Gorkhas, to recapture it. Dogra immediately proceeded with his men towards Point 15450. They found that the Chinese had withdrawn. The post was re-occupied at 1600 hours without firing a shot or a single casualty. In addition to the CO who was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra (MVC), the battalion won three Vir Chakras.

As can be seen, there are several discrepancies in the records of the two units. According to the Gorkhas, point 15450 was held by Lieutenant Rathore while 10 JAK Rifles claim to have handed over the post to Second Lieutenant Rana of 7/11 Gorkha Rifles. Both units, viz. 7/11 Gorkha Rifles and 10 JAK Rifles, claim to have recaptured Point 15450 which, in fact, had already been vacated by the Chinese. Compared to the skirmish at Nathu La which lasted 5 days and resulted in many casualties, the one at Cho La was relatively minor lasting just a day. Though this is not mentioned in their regimental history, Major KG Nair of 10 JAK Rifles was later court martialled.

Conclusion

Most regimental histories of the post-Independence period tend to glorify the actions of battalions as well as individuals. Hence, successes are highlighted but failures rarely mentioned. In battle, cases of units fighting to the last man are matched by instances of units breaking up and examples of audacious commanders by specimens of indecisive leaders. Not surprisingly, some earn medals and promotions while others are sacked. Like in any two-sided match, the odds of winning and losing in battle are equal and one would expect that the performance of units and commanders would conform to this pattern. The military profession has always placed a greater premium on valour, rather than victory. This is especially true in India, where the most famous military leaders — Porus, Prithvi Raj Chauhan, Rana Pratap, and Rani Laxmi Bai — lost their battles. Yet, their stories are part of legend and have acted as an inspiration to generations of Indians. Unfortunately, military historians today have different views and failure in battle seems to carry with it a stigma and guilt, which is totally unwarranted. Today, a misplaced sense of honour and '*izzat*' impels units to hide mistakes and failures and magnify achievements. If not corrected, this may seriously impinge on the integrity of post-Independence military history of India.

Endnotes

¹ The term 'Army' can be read by the reader to encompass all armed forces of the Union.

² Historical negationism, also called denialism, is falsification or distortion of the historical record. It should not be conflated with historical revisionism, a broader term that extends to newly evidenced, fairly reasoned academic reinterpretations of history. <https://www.bing.com/search?q=historical+negationism+&qsn&form=QBRE&sp=-1&pq=historical+negationism+&sc=4-23&sk=&cvid=991856EE2F9640EEBA8279F81986AC3F>

³ *A Talent for War: The Military Biography of Lt Gen Sagat Singh* by Randhir Singh is one such book. This author's book *Leadership in the Indian Army: Biographies of Twelve Soldiers* also covers Lt Gen Sagat Singh.

⁴ Watershed 1967 – India's Forgotten Victory over China. By Probal DasGupta; Publisher: Juggernaut Books, New Delhi (April 2020), Pages 208; Price Rs 390/-, ISBN: 978-93-53450-93-9 (Paperback)

⁵ https://usiofindia.org/publication/usi-journal/reviews-of-recent-books-12/?sf_paged=2

⁶ For excerpts of the diary, see Veekay's History Book, *Nathu La the True Story* at <http://veekay-militaryhistory.blogspot.com/2013/04/nathula-1967-real-story.html>

⁷ "The Nathu La skirmish: When Chinese Were Given a Bloody Nose" by Major General Sheru Thapliyal. Accessed Aug 24, 2021 from <https://archive.claws.in/595/the-nathu-la-skirmish-when-chinese-were-given-a-bloody-nose-sheru-thapliyal.html>